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Reconstruction

A Report on the Christian Refugee Problem at Harbin, China



*The Exodus of 1929
Refugees in the Railroad Station of Prenzlau, Germany*

BY THE CENTRAL BUREAU FOR RELIEF OF
THE EVÄNGELICAL CHURCHES OF EUROPE
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FOREWORD

Before reporting on the progress of the joint action to help the Christian refugees now concentrated in Harbin, China, it might be well to review briefly the situation brought about by the anti-religious legislation of Soviet Russia.

The "Five Year Program for the Liquidation of Christianity" was launched two years ago. It is really but one feature of the entire program for putting an end to family life as such, to the private ownership of property, and to private enterprise in industry, agriculture, and commerce.

Tersely put, the anti-religious policy works out like this: if a man is a member of a church, he is not a good citizen of the Soviet Republic; if he is not a good citizen, he does not deserve a bread card; if he has no bread card, he cannot buy at the government food and clothing depots, where prices, though high, are regulated. He must buy necessities at exorbitant prices from "bootlegger" sources, and he must earn the money to pay for them by precarious means, since he cannot hold a government-controlled job because he is not a "good citizen".

THE EXODUS OF 1929

In various parts of Russia, especially in the Volga Valley, there have been for centuries settlements of people who were united by a common religion and who lived quiet, law-abiding and peaceful lives within their little communities. Such, for instance, were the Doukobars, who were finally driven out by repeated waves of persecution. Such also are the Mennonite colonies, most of them of German race, who were settled in Russia by Katherine the Great, and later by Alexander I, with a view to introducing new agricultural methods into the country and to reclaim vast stretches of land which were practically uninhabited and entirely unproductive. As professional and model farmers they were given privileges by the government, and being geographically rather isolated, they achieved a sort of local self-government. They developed a considerable degree of culture; illiteracy was unknown among them, and so were crime and pauperism.

The Stundists, or Russian Baptists, formed another large evangelical group. Lutherans were fairly numerous, the Reformed (or Presbyterian) faith was less widely represented, but was strong in some of the cities, notably Odessa. Other evangelical elements were well represented in various parts of that huge country, particularly the Methodists and a number of independent "evangelical brotherhoods".

For a time, all these evangelical groups enjoyed a certain immunity from the persecutions visited upon the Orthodox Church after the revolution, but after the "Five Year Plan" was put into effect, they felt the full brunt of its terms. They saw their churches turned into motion picture houses, their leaders prosecuted, imprisoned, or exiled, their families separated, property confiscated, the work of their hands taken away from them.

Finally, some 20,000 of the Mennonites, several thousand Lutherans, and smaller numbers belonging to other creeds, made up their minds to leave everything and get out of the country. The government consented to let them emigrate, but at the same time, everything was done to hinder their going. Less than two thirds of the number that started ever got over the boundaries. The bulk of this migration went through Germany where everything was done to care for them and facilitate their preparations to find new homes in Canada and Brazil. As the sad processions came from the railroad stations or steamer landings, respectively, people stood still in the streets, and men lifted their hats. In utter silence the weary refugees made their way to the concentration camps which were hastily prepared for them. The accommodations were by no means comfortable, because this was the end of November, but all that these unfortunate people said was: "Thank God, we're here!"

THE REFUGEE SITUATION IN 1931

Meanwhile, the Soviet Government, finding that all this was very bad advertising, passed the most stringent laws against emigration. None the less, families and individuals frequently succeeded in escaping, particularly to the East, with the result that a refugee problem soon began to develop in

China. Various relief agencies did their best to find new locations for these groups, but with the depression of this year, it has been impossible to get any more people into Canada, and moreover, funds were not available for transportation. So the refugees were temporarily settled in shacks and other makeshift buildings at Harbin, to await a chance to get to Paraguay, which is willing to take them.

Then the Chinese Government precipitated a crisis by announcing its intention of deporting the refugees to Russia unless immediate steps were taken to get them away. (This was late in August.) There were several reasons for this action. First, China is already overcrowded, Harbin absolutely teems with surplus population, and here is a group of aliens making matters worse. Not all of the refugees can count on regular help from denominational or other relief bodies, hence they are actually competing with the coolies for a little work to keep themselves alive, thus adding to an already aggravated unemployment problem. Finally, destitute and helpless as they are, they are still a thorn in the flesh of the Russian Government, which is bending every effort to induce the Chinese authorities to cease harboring these "criminals". As China maintains flourishing commercial relations with the Soviet Republic, the refugees constitute a political embarrassment to their present hosts.

As soon as the Central Bureau for Relief learned of the contemplated action by the Chinese government,—originally set for October first—we sent out the news to the religious press. Eventually some of this information found its way into the newspapers also. Letters were sent out as quickly as possible asking for contributions in this emergency. A previous appeal on behalf of Russian Christians, made by our office in the spring, had brought in about \$4,000 of which \$500 were still in hand. This sum was sent at once to the American Consul at Harbin to care for those evangelicals that had no other backing. At the same time, we gathered data from all sides as to the exact number of people involved, the amount of money that was needed to colonize them, and what proportion of this amount could be undertaken by denominational and other relief agencies. Our director, Dr. Keller, at the Geneva Office, went immediately to the International Red Cross and to the Refugee Commission of the League of Nations, to see what could be done in a diplomatic way to secure an extension of time and also to obtain long term credits for the cost of colonization.

The survey revealed the following facts:

In Harbin proper, there are 1,066 Christian refugees, viz:

Mennonites,	515
Lutherans,	400
Baptists,	44
Miscellaneous,	57
Catholics,	50

In other parts of Manchuria there are additional groups, bringing the total number to 1,300 people. This is less than was originally estimated. The mistake was due to the fact that the cable giving the approxi-

mate numbers was misread, the 400 Lutherans being counted as *additional* instead of being *included* in the 1,300 total.

The governments of Brazil and Paraguay have both declared their willingness to admit the refugees as settlers, providing suitable guarantees are given that they will be carried financially until they can become self-supporting. Mexico is another possibility.

It will take about \$150 per head to colonize the prospective settlers in either North or South America. This estimate is based on the cost of the Mennonite and Lutheran immigrants who went to Canada two years ago. Most of these, by the way, are practically self-supporting now, in spite of adverse agricultural conditions during the last year.

As the Lutherans will probably be looked after by the Lutheran World Convention, it leaves only about 1,000 people to be cared for by other agencies. Were it not for the fact that the Mennonite bodies are still in debt for the cost of the much larger migrations of two years ago, they could probably handle this problem themselves, but as it is, they must seek the cooperation of other Christians in order to rescue this little band of martyrs who have fled from Russia at the risk of their lives.

\$150,000 is a large sum of money this year. There is hope that part of it may be obtained in long-term loans or credits, and it certainly would be pitiful if at least two thirds of it could not be raised by the Christian world.

\$25,000 is the immediate goal. With this amount in hand, a steamer could be chartered, and the refugees could be brought from Harbin to the coast. The Mennonite committees have collected something over \$15,000 already, and the Central Bureau for Relief has \$5,000 designated for this purpose.

The Central Bureau hopes that the American Churches constituting the Federal Council of Churches will rally to meet this need, and raise at least the \$5,000 needed to make up the first \$25,000.

In the meantime, our European office has not been idle. Through the good offices of the Chinese delegate to the League of Nations, our Director has secured an extension of time for the removal of the refugees. The Nansen Refugee Commission and the International Red Cross have been enlisted and have pledged their aid.

A meeting of representatives from American relief agencies was held in Philadelphia on September 28th, under the auspices of the Philadelphia Federation of Churches. The Central Bureau for Relief, the American Mennonite Central Relief Committee, the Mennonite Settlers Aid Society, the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, the German congregations among the Baptists and Congregationalists, the American Friends Service Committee and the National Lutheran Council will all cooperate in this emergency.

In tackling the Harbin refugee problem, we have the sad consolation that with the present refugees once cared for, it is most unlikely that others will appear on the scene. The Soviet guard along the borders has become so

strict that escape is practically impossible. The nephew of Bishop Jacob H. Janzen, of the Canadian Mennonite Church in Ontario, tried to cross over into Persia. He was caught by the patrol and when last heard from was in a Trans-Caucasian prison.

Many of the generous friends who sent in contributions as a result of our appeals for Harbin, expressed the wish to be kept informed as to what was being done about the matter. The foregoing account is the answer to those requests. As soon as new developments take place (i.e., as soon as we have that initial \$25,000!), another Bulletin will be sent out.

We wish to tender to all who have helped us thus far our most sincere thanks for their cooperation and kindly interest. With so many helpful forces united, the way MUST be found to rescue our fellow Christians at Harbin.

**Paraphrase of a telegram, dated October 6, 1931, from the American
Consul at Harbin, China.**

Replying to the Department's telegram of October 2, 1931, the American Consul at Harbin reports that \$1,000 which was transmitted in May, 1931, by the American office of the Central Bureau for Relief of the Evangelical Churches of Europe to the American Consulate at Harbin, was received and delivered on May 27, 1931, to Mr. Howard Haag, Sr., Secretary of the Y. M. C. A. at Harbin and Treasurer of the Joint Commission for Relief of German-Russian refugees. Mr. Haag informed the Consul that the funds were used to house, feed and clothe 1,700 refugees for 9 months. Mr. Haag also stated that a general report and accounts are now being prepared and will be mailed soon.

—(*The above is copy of official notification received from the Department of State at Washington.*)

ANOTHER "THANK YOU"

In Bulletin No. 9 we inserted a plea for special contributions of small change and postage stamps to defray the cost of these Bulletins. It is a pleasure to be able to report that the contributions received as a result of this appeal practically paid for an entire issue. Many of the contributions came in anonymously. To all the donors we express our grateful appreciation.

A LETTER OF THANKS FROM MENNONITE REFUGEES
NOW IN CANADA

UNITED MENNONITE CHURCHES IN ONTARIO

June 1st, 1931.

To the Central Bureau for Relief of the Evangelical
Churches of Europe.
American Executive Committee,
287 Fourth Avenue,
New York City.

Dear Christian Friends:

We, the undersigned Russian Mennonite refugees, who were enabled by the mercy of God to escape out of Soviet Russia in November and December, 1929, and have since been enabled by many kind friends to find a new home in Ontario, Canada, desire to express to you our deep gratitude for and sincere appreciation of the Christian love manifested toward us by the Christians of America in the time of our great need. We have learned that as a result of the appeal from Dr. Adolf Keller of Geneva, the European Director of your Bureau, which was communicated by your Secretary, Miss Froendt, to thousands of kindhearted Christian friends in America, thousands of dollars were quickly given to relieve the suffering of the Russian refugees who escaped into Germany. Our hearts have been deeply moved by this manifestation of the love of Christ and we could not feel at rest our souls without expressing to you our thanks. May God requite you and all those who have so kindly shared with us in time of need for all that you have done. In His Name,

(Signed)

Peter Friesen	M. Boeze	Katharina Martens
John Klassen	F. Janzen	Liese Boese
K. Borkmann	Isaak Schulz	Martin Boese
Peter Wiebe	Margarete Schulz	Johann Boese
Katherine Wiebe	Maria Boese	Anna Epp
Elizabeth Martens	Marie Boschmann	Henry Epp
Mary Wiebe	Anna Ediger	W. Andres
Jacob Wiebe	H. Hanzen	Johann Woelt



A group of Mennonite refugees at the home of Mennonite refugees in Harbin. March, 1931. (Courtesy of *Mennonite Weekly Review*)

It should be clearly stated that the joint action on behalf of the Harbin refugees will be carried through on behalf of *all* the Christian refugees in that district, regardless of denominational affiliations.